fomenting peasant opposition to the Sandinistas (and support for the Contras). Similarly, he shows that the introduction of guerrilla warfare tactics in late 1983 and 1984, and the use of Batallones de Lucha Irregular (Unconventional Warfare Battalions, BLIs), helped to secure the Sandinistas’ military victory. But he fails to mention that the BLIs were composed almost entirely of conscripts, and that the use of compulsory military service in these years was one of the Sandinistas’ most divisive and bitterly opposed policies.

The second half of the book focuses on events in the United States, and the impact of the FSLN’s advocacy work. Perla provides a series of statistical analyses of coded data. He argues that the FSLN gained considerable ‘standing’ within the US media; and that the FSLN was successful in ensuring that the framing of the Contra conflict in the mainstream media ran counter to the President’s preferred narrative. Working from opinion polls, he then suggests that the periods when this counter-narrative was more prevalent correlate with periods when public opposition to the Contra War was more pronounced. Finally, Perla presents data which demonstrates that members of Congress with larger numbers of solidarity organisations in their districts consistently voted against Contra aid in greater numbers than their peers, arguing that this demonstrates the decisive impact of the Central America solidarity movement.

Throughout the book, Perla relies on a comparison between Nicaragua and other cases of ‘rollback’ in the Reagan era: Afghanistan, Cambodia and Angola. He suggests that the fact that Congress consistently supported aid for these other interventions is clear proof that it was the FSLN’s advocacy efforts, and not alternative factors such as Vietnam syndrome, which ensured that Reagan’s intervention in Nicaragua was unsuccessful. Given the centrality of this point to the overall argument, a brief summary of these other cases of intervention would have been welcome, and might have revealed some important differences. In Afghanistan, Angola and Cambodia the presence of substantial numbers of foreign troops from Communist countries made US intervention much easier to justify to Congress. Moreover, in both Afghanistan and Angola third countries – Pakistan and South Africa respectively – played a significant role in the intervention, quelling congressional fears about the extent of CIA involvement. In Nicaragua, Argentina was originally meant to play a similar role, a hope that was thwarted as a result of the Falklands War.

Arguably, the relative strength of solidarity with Central America was not only the result of activists’ agency. The proximity of the United States and Nicaragua, and the considerable migration that had occurred between the two nations, created far more fertile conditions for the kind of cultural interchange necessary for activism. But these caveats do not detract from the fact that, as Perla shows, the raw unmediated testimony of victims of the Contra War had a considerable impact in the United States, thanks to the countless speaker tours and brigades organised by solidarity activists in Nicaragua and the United States. This book is a very welcome contribution to the scholarship on the Contra War, one that is sure to spark considerable and fruitful debate.

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swinging corpses and boxes of severed limbs have littered the front pages of national and international newspapers. Yet such headlines have a historical context. They cannot and should not be rationalised through the employment of simplistic economic explanations of the drug trade’s financial appeal or lazy stereotypes of Mexicans’ proclivity to violence.

As Pablo Piccato makes clear in this important and timely book, crime, violence and impunity have a history. By the mid-twentieth century there was a ‘broadly shared tolerance in Mexican civil society for extrajudicial punishment and the victimisation of the innocent’. This tolerance arose ‘despite the parallel emergence of critical perspectives sharply condemning the inability of the state to seek and acknowledge the truth’ (p. 1).

As Piccato argues, the bonds linking crime, truth and justice are a ‘premise of modern society’ (p. 1). For society to function, we need to believe in these connections. A crime is committed; the police find out what happened; and the judiciary applies the appropriate punishment. Yet in Mexico citizens started to define reality and their relationship to the state by the absence of these links. ‘The truth about specific crimes was often impossible to know, and as a result, justice could be achieved only occasionally’ (p. 1). In order to survive this system, Mexicans developed what the author describes as a ‘criminal literacy’ which absorbed lessons from both true crime stories and fictional narratives.

Piccato lays out these startling and original ideas in a series of elegantly formulated essays. These mix theoretical and historical insights with well-drawn pen portraits of murderers, journalists, hitmen, pulp authors and corrupt cops. Over the course of the book, the mid-century Mexico City of the Waikiki cabaret, the Casa de la Bandida brothel and the sweaty print rooms of the country’s tabloid press come alive.

The book begins by examining the history of Mexico’s jury system, which ran from 1869 to 1929. Jury trials were originally introduced as symbols of popular sovereignty. But during the Porfiriato more and more crimes were excluded from the system. Many positivists believed that most Mexicans were incapable of the kind of cold, rational thought processes that a jury position demanded. After the Revolution, jury trials returned with force. They became polyphonic, public debates where traditional and radical, new ideas – particularly over gender roles – met and clashed. For Piccato, the closure of these open trials not only put an end to more democratic forms of justice but also formed ‘an effort to maintain the masculine monopoly over justice’ (p. 43).

Though jury trials disappeared, public interest in crime, truth and justice failed to peter out. Instead, it shifted to the crime pages or nota roja section of the tabloid press. During the middle decades of the last century the market for Mexico City’s tabloids, like La Prensa, and its standalone crime magazines, like Detectives and Alarma, increased markedly. Though often dismissed as scandalous, morbid and pulpy these became the bulwarks of Mexico’s public sphere. Here, journalists created narratives that were broadly impervious to state manipulation and often exposed the collusion between officials and the criminal class. At the same time, readers wrote in to discuss the finer points of police work, opine on the mental state of criminals and propose suitable punishments for the guilty. Here, criminal literacy, a crucial learning endeavour for Mexico City’s millions of recent immigrants, was born.

In the following section, Piccato examines the actors involved in both crime and its prevention. There are chapters on detectives, on murderers and on pistoleros or hitmen. There are fascinating descriptions of Valente Quintana, the cop and occasional private detective who mixed ‘showmanship, knowledge of the underworld and discreet use of force’ (p. 112) to get results, Alfonso Quiroz Cuarón, Mexico’s magpie criminologist,
who blended old positivist biological tropes with new Freudian thinking, and Roberto ‘el Güero’ Batillas, the pistol-wearing tough guy pictured on the front cover of the book. Outside these entertaining portraits, Piccato cleverly explains how these actors as well as their audiences wove together reality and fiction to create mid-century Mexico’s crime milieu. As he argues, using Jorge Luis Borges’s insight, infamy was a ‘surface of images’ but one which Mexican citizens were forced to engage with on a daily basis.

The final section examines some of the results of this interaction, in particular the rise of Mexican crime fiction. Here, he dissects some of the well-known texts like Rudolfo Usigli’s Ensayo de un crimen (América, 1944), an obvious and powerful influence on Piccato’s own work, and Rafael Bernal’s El complot mongol (Joaquín Mortiz, 1969), as well as less celebrated works like the serialised La Prensa crime series by the mysterious Leo d’Olmo, who emerges as a kind of B Movie B. Traven.

Taken together, Piccato’s new book is an extraordinary and important work. In fact, in my opinion it is the most important work on Mexico’s recent history since Sergio Aguayo’s La Charola: Una historia de los servicios de inteligencia en México (Grajalbo, 2001). By placing crime, impunity, truth and justice at the forefront of relations between state and society, he redefines the way we should look at twentieth-century Mexican history. Post-revolutionary Mexico was not only the site for clashes over land, workers’ rights and the cultural mosaic of nationalism, but also the place for an increasingly violent and desperate struggle over citizens’ access to justice. This was played out not only on the streets with thuggish cops and intimidating hitmen, but also in the public sphere in the pages of Mexico’s tabloids and crime magazines. This struggle, in turn, extended into debates over land, workers’ rights and culture as well as citizenship, gender, politics and the role of journalism. I have no doubt that historians will be quoting, debating, and working off this book for years to come. It also deserves to bridge disciplines and should influence the literary critics, political scientists and sociologists of Latin America.

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One of the challenges of writing the history of social movements in Latin America originates in the elusiveness of historical actors themselves, and in the continuous labour of historians to assess the adequacy of the theories that make them and their contexts legible. In this set of essays, Carlos Illades engages in such a task by examining different cycles of mobilisation, rebellion and protest in modern Mexico, and the ways in which popular movements challenged prevailing structures of domination, unveiling the fault lines of modern state formation. In Chapter 1, Illades provides a brief review of historiographic and sociological contributions to the study of social movements, highlighting those that centred on the experiential dimensions of collective action; the logic of collective violence; and the relationship of contention that protestors, rebels and rioters establish with structures of power. In setting up this dialogue between history and theory, Illades aims to scrutinise the link between popular mobilisation and state repression; the non-linear relation between protest and democratisation; and the